

AWESOME CONFUSION -- PROMISE KEEPERS

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At the Promise Keepers Clergy Conference in Atlanta (February 1996) a book by E. Glenn Wagner entitled *The Awesome Power of Shared Beliefs* was distributed to the 39,000 "clergymen" in attendance. The book, produced by Word Publishing, was copyrighted in 1995. Its cover boasts the same type of design incorporated into previous publications recommended by PK, including *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper* (Focus on the Family Publishing, 1994). Contributors to *Awesome Power* include Jack Hayford and Bruce Shelley.

The Awesome Power of Shared Beliefs is important because it relates the ecumenical philosophy driving Promise Keepers. I have entitled this critique "Awesome Confusion," because that is precisely what this book promotes--CONFUSION ABOUT THE CHURCH, CONFUSION ABOUT ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE, CONFUSION ABOUT UNITY, and CONFUSION ABOUT DENOMINATIONAL DISTINCTIVES

CONFUSION ABOUT THE CHURCH

Promise Keepers is confused about the church. Consider the following excerpts from *The Awesome Power of Shared Beliefs* which demonstrate the view of the church commonly found among Promise Keepers representatives:

"We in the Body of Christ are experiencing something today that is quite unique. Never before in our nation's history have so many from such varied backgrounds been drawn together in evangelistic outreach, Christ-centered discipleship teaching, and corporate worship" (p. v).

"... men of many denominations, had gathered to share together [at a PK rally in Boulder, Colorado] under the banner of our Lord Jesus Christ. ... The body was lifting up the Body. ... A casual glance would confirm that the crowd was made up of a far-reaching tapestry of diversity. Yet in the midst of this diversity, there was true unity" (pp. xi,xii).

"Could it be that the church in the United States is barely keeping up with the population growth because of a lack of unity? Could our lack of unity be contributing to the moral decline we are experiencing?" (p. 27).

Promise Keepers promotes the idea that the "church" or the "body of Christ" is composed of all professing Christians in all the various denominations. This is far removed from the biblical view of the church. The word "church" is used 115 times in the Authorized Version. In 114 of those passages the Greek word translated "church" is *ekklesia*. (In one passage, Acts 19:37, the Greek word *hierosulos*, meaning "a robber of a sacred place," is translated "church.") *Ekklesia*

means a lawful, organized assembly. It is used in three ways in the N.T. (1) Israel in the wilderness (Acts 7:38). (2) A political assembly (Acts 19:32-41). (3) Christ's assembly (Mt. 16:18). Of the 115 N.T. references to the "church," 111 refer to Christ's assembly. The references to Christ's church are divided into three categories: (1) The New Testament Assembly (Acts 2:47; 13:1). This refers to a local body of baptized believers organized after the apostolic pattern for the fulfillment of the Great Commission. The vast majority of references to the church apply directly to this local body. Sometimes "church" refers to the local assembly in a general, generic, institutional sense (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:6). (2) The Heavenly Assembly of the saints (Heb. 12:23; 2:12). (3) The Future Eternal Assembly of all the saints of all ages (Eph. 1:10-11; 2:16-22). In this sense the church is eternal (Eph. 3:21).

Note that nowhere in the New Testament is a group of Christians in a region or in the whole world referred to as "the church." Whenever the apostles described Christians scattered across a region, they consistently used the plural of the word church. Paul did not speak of the "church of Galatia" or the "church of Judaea" or the "church of Asia" or the "church of Macedonia," "but the churchES of Galatia, the churchES of Judaea, the churchES of Asia, the churchES of Macedonia (1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Cor. 8:1; Gal. 1:2,22). See also Acts 15:41; Rom. 16:4,16; 1 Thess. 2:14; Rev. 1:4.

Promise Keepers speakers love to refer to the body in 1 Corinthians 12. "And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you ... but God hath tempered the body together ... That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another" (1 Cor. 12:21,24,25).

Promise Keepers applies this passage to interdenominational unity, but it is speaking of no such thing. The Apostle is writing to the church at Corinth, to a New Testament assembly, and is urging them to consider one another as members of a body. Each church is a body. When Paul said, "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular," he was speaking directly to the church at Corinth. The passage has no meaning apart from a local assembly, because Christians scattered in various places do not function as a body. "And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). This is not true apart from the assembly, but it is perfectly applicable to every New Testament church.

For Promise Keepers to define the unity of the body of Christ as denominational unity is unscriptural and is a great confusion. The denominations of today are more akin to the Harlot of Revelation 17 than to the bride of Jesus Christ. Most of the denominations are far removed from the New Testament faith and from the simple New Testament church pattern. What about Roman Catholicism? Its New Catechism claims that salvation is obtained by baptism and the sacraments, and that the fullness of salvation is only in the Roman Catholic Church. What about the "Protestant" denominations? These are largely an apostate mixture of truth and error, of Bible and human tradition. More than 300 of the "Protestant" bodies today are members of the wicked World Council of Churches, which opens its assemblies with pagan rituals and believes

there is saving light in pagan religions. What about the Baptist denominations? Most of these, too, are apostate from the biblical faith. The American Baptist Convention is a founding member of the World Council of Churches and has long been infiltrated with soul-damning modernism. The Southern Baptist Convention has formal dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, invites Catholic priests to address its conventions, and is New Evangelical at best.

God does not call His people to unity with denominational apostasy. He calls for separation. "And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues" (Rev. 18:4).

CONFUSION ABOUT ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE

Promise Keepers is confused about essential doctrine. The authors of *The Awesome Power of Shared Beliefs* divide biblical truth into "essential" and "non-essential." While claiming that they do not believe in unity at the expense of truth, they contend there are only five truths which form the foundation for a proper Christian unity:

"It is imperative that the body of Christ come together around a true set of core beliefs if we are to have a positive impact on this world. ... The key is to be rooted in the foundational doctrines of our faith. ... At the core of a Christian's belief system are five doctrines: The Bible, God, Jesus Christ, The Holy Spirit, The redemption of man" (pp. 36,42,43).

Promise Keepers claims that it takes five doctrines seriously, but that other doctrines in the Word of God are "non-essential."

"But there are also issues that are not of the magnitude of violating one of the fundamentals of the faith. They would be placed in the category of secondary issues, and thus, Matthew 18 would not be applicable Scripture. For these sorts of disagreements, Romans 15 and 15 would come into focus" (pp. 180,181).

This view of "essential" doctrine is unscriptural and is a great source of confusion. We make two observations:

FIRST, the Christian's authority is not some ancient church "creed" or someone's view of foundational doctrine. Our sole authority is the Bible. And THE BIBLE NEVER DIVIDES TRUTH INTO ESSENTIAL AND NON-ESSENTIAL. While not all portions of the Bible are equally important in the sense of salvation, it is all the Word of God and it is all important in the sense that it is God's revelation. The Apostles delivered "the faith," a body of truth, not a group of non-connected doctrines. The doctrines of the Word of God are intimately interconnected. The Christian is exhorted to contend for "the faith once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). What part of the faith are we to contend for? All of it! Every portion of it. Timothy was assigned the task of making certain that NO OTHER DOCTRINE was taught at Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3). What doctrine was Timothy to consider foundational? All doctrine! Paul labored

to declare unto the Ephesian believers "ALL THE COUNSEL OF GOD" (Acts 20:27). What part of God's counsel was considered crucial? All of it! From the beginning to the end of the New Testament there is no hint that the man of God is free to consider some teachings of the Word of God essential and others non-essential. What the New Testament says about everything is essential doctrine, whether it be Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit or man or woman or angels or hell or heaven or the devil or sin or justification or sanctification or the church or morality--everything is essential doctrine in the sense that it is to be believed, preached, and contended for.

Second, Promise Keepers is hypocritical in claiming to care about the so-called five fundamentals of the faith. What about the doctrine of justification? There are large numbers of men associated with PK who DENY the biblical doctrine of justification. A case in point: There were 600 Catholic priests at the Promise Keepers Clergy Conference in Atlanta. If they believe what their "church" teaches, these 600 priests reject biblical justification and they teach thousands of people a false sacramental gospel. Does Promise Keepers lift a voice to warn men of the blasphemy of the Roman Catholic view of justification? No. What about the doctrine of biblical inspiration? Great numbers of so-called Evangelicals today deny the biblical doctrine of the verbal plenary inspiration of Holy Scripture. This has been documented in a number of books by well-known Evangelicals, including Harold Lindsell in *The Battle for the Bible* (1980) and *The Bible in the Balance* (1979), Francis Schaeffer in *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (1984), and David Wells in *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (1993). Does Promise Keepers define inspiration plainly IN CONTRAST TO the false views and does PK EXPOSE those who deny biblical inspiration? No.

The assertion that Promise Keepers leaders are committed to the "core truths of the Christian faith" are meaningless words, in our estimation, because they never lift the voice to warn plainly of FALSE christs and false gospels and false spirits. To do so would destroy their ecumenical program.

Promise Keepers, with its philosophy that doctrine can be divided into essential and non-essential, is denying the Word of God.

Some might ask, "But if all New Testament truth is essential, how is it possible to have Christian unity?" I am glad you asked. Consider our next point.

CONFUSION ABOUT UNITY

Promise Keepers is confused about unity. They promote something they call "unity in diversity."

"Disunity brings shame and reproach to the name and message of Christ. In contrast, the ability to live in the midst of diversity declares that there is a God who is greater than our differences and shows that God can do what man cannot" (p. 14).

This idea of "unity in diversity" is a tired old ecumenical concept, and it is utterly unscriptural. While it is true that there is diversity within a sound New Testament assembly, it is not the diversity promoted by Promise Keepers. The "unity in diversity" which PK urges would include diversity about the doctrine of the Holy Spirit or the doctrine of Eternal Security or the doctrine of ecclesiology or the doctrine of eschatology or the doctrine of spiritual gifts or the doctrine of baptism or the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. This is a false unity. God does not allow such a diversity. God's unity is built around conformity to the New Testament faith in all its doctrinal implications. Consider the following key Scriptures on the subject of Christian unity:

"Only let our conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast IN ONE SPIRIT, WITH ONE MIND striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Philippians 1:27).

"That ye may WITH ONE MIND AND ONE MOUTH glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:6).

"Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that YE ALL SPEAK THE SAME THING, and that there BE NO DIVISIONS among you; but that ye be PERFECTLY JOINED TOGETHER IN THE SAME MIND AND IN THE SAME JUDGMENT" (1 Cor. 1:10).

"Finally, brethren, farewell, Be perfect, be of good comfort, BE OF ONE MIND, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you" (2 Cor. 13:11).

There is no unity in diversity in these Scriptures. God calls upon His people to have ONE MIND. That is doctrinal agreement. How can this be possible? It is not possible in an interdenominational context. In such a context one must of necessity limit his message to some degree for the sake of unity. If he does not limit his message, he will automatically limit his sphere of fellowship. If I were to stand at a Promise Keepers conference and preach plainly what I believe about the church and the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts and biblical prophecy, I would cause great division. Why? Because that conference is a divided body composed of all sorts of doctrinal persuasions. Oneness of mind in the whole counsel of biblical doctrine is only possible in that context in which the Scriptures are speaking: The New Testament Assembly. Each of the verses we have quoted are written in the context of the church--the New Testament assembly, not some universal church composed of all denominations. Within a sound church which has biblical standards for membership--repentant faith in Jesus Christ and scriptural baptism--and which has qualified, trained, God-called leaders, there can be true biblical unity, meaning oneness of mind pertaining to the whole counsel of God.

Promise Keepers cannot obey the Scriptures we have cited. Their unity in diversity is a false unity which dishonors the Lord Jesus Christ who gave us these Scriptures.

CONFUSION ABOUT DENOMINATIONAL DISTINCTIVES

Promise Keepers is confused about the nature of denominational distinctives. Consider a typical statement:

"As J.I. Packer has said, 'It's about time for Christians who recite the creed and mean it to come together for fellowship and witness regardless of denominational identity'" (p. 179).

From this statement one would think that denominational identities are unimportant distinctives which can be ignored. That is impossible. There are many things which divide the denominations, but they can be categorized into two basic things: doctrine and practice. What is the difference between a Lutheran and a Baptist? Doctrine and practice. They don't believe the same things. The Lutheran doesn't believe the same thing as the Baptist about baptism or the church or the ordinances or biblical prophecy. There are denominational doctrines that are scriptural and there are denominational doctrines that are unscriptural. But to say that they are unimportant and that they should be laid aside, is wrong. For churches and denominations which have turned away from the Word of God to ignore their distinctives and to come together is one thing. One error is no better than another! Apostasy SHOULD feel at home with apostasy. But for churches which cleave to the Word of God to ignore denominational distinctives and to come together with those who deny biblical doctrine is insanity and rebellion to the Scriptures.

This is what Promise Keepers calls for. Rebellion to the Scriptures. I, for one, refuse to heed their call. By God's grace I am going to continue to believe, preach, and contend for the WHOLE counsel of God. I renounce their unscriptural diversity.

"Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way" (Psalm 119:128).